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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000325

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: HOA HAO ACTIVISTS PLAN PROTESTS IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A) 04 HCMC 252; B) 01 HCMC 302

1. (SBU) Summary: The California-based Hoa Hao Buddhist Organization, Phat Giao Hoa Hao, informed us on March 4 of the arrest of two Hoa Hao activists in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang. They are being investigated for distributing audio-visual materials without proper licensing. In a follow-up meeting on the arrest with their spiritual leader Le Quang Liem, leader of the unrecognized Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC), Liem (strictly protect) focused on a possible gathering of his sect in An Giang on April 3. He said that if the police intervened, his followers would demonstrate and some might commit self-immolation. We categorically told Liem that while we supported freedom of religion and expression and peaceful assembly, we did not condone violence in any form and would halt all contact with him if he were to encourage his followers to self-immolate. End summary.

Hoa Hao activists arrested

2. (SBU) Nguyen Mai, Director of the California-based Hoa Hao Buddhist Organization, Phat Gia Hoa Hao, contacted us on March 4 to report on the arrest in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang of two brothers, Tran Van Thang and Tran Van Hoang, affiliated with Hoa Hao dissident Le Quang Liem. On March 14 Thang's wife, Nguyen Thi Hoang Em (strictly protect), told us that on February 25 An Giang police had arrested the men after a search of the house revealed approximately 900 DVDs. The DVDs contained the teachings of Huynh Phu So, the founder of Hoa Hao Buddhism, as well as the interpretations of Le Quang Liem. The police also confiscated a significant amount of audio-visual equipment and printed materials.

3. (SBU) In response to our inquiries, officials of the An Giang Committee for Religious Affairs informed us on March 18 that the two men were arrested for illegally possessing, copying and disseminating video tapes and disks. They claimed that the two men had admitted that since August 2004 they had produced and distributed approximately 10,000 disks without government authorization. Our understanding is that the brothers also could face indictment for disseminating anti-GVN materials, depending on police analysis of the disks' content. (Note: The copying and distribution of audio-visual products is classified as a "business activity" under Vietnamese law, and must be licensed by GVN authorities. The brothers had no such license. End note.)

4. (SBU) On March 23, we met with the 85-year old spiritual leader of an unrecognized Hoa Hao sect, Le Quang Liem, to discuss the arrest of his two followers. (Per ref A, there is a bitter split in the Hoa Hao church between a GVN-recognized faction and other non-recognized groups.) Liem (strictly protect) used the meeting to advise us that his faction planned to hold a service on April 3 to commemorate the anniversary of the disappearance of the founder of Hoa Haoism. (Liem maintains that the Viet Minh murdered the Hoa Hao patriarch in 1947). Liem said that he anticipated that the An Giang police would try to prevent the gathering and observed that his followers would respond by holding public demonstrations, hunger strikes and possibly self-immolations. Liem then urged the USG not to lift Vietnam's CPC designation, saying that by doing so "the door of religious freedom that was slowly starting to open would be sla-QQMliut."

5. (SBU) Liem asked what our reaction to self-immolations would be and whether we would attend the April 3 ceremony. He cited the 1963 self-immolation of a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, as a contributing factor in the fall of the regime of South Vietnamese President Diem. We told Liem that irrespective of CPC designation, we would continue to press for greater religious freedom in Vietnam. In that regard, we trusted that local authorities would allow Hoa Hao believers to worship peacefully, if that was the intent of the gathering. We underscored that we neither condone nor support self-immolation or other acts of violence and would not attend the April 3 event. We reminded Liem that the self-immolation of a Hoa Hao activist in 2001 (ref B) had not advanced the cause of religious freedom in Vietnam.

6. (SBU) We later met with Liem's daughter and Hoa Hao activist, Le Quynh Nga, to discuss her father's planning for the April 3 event. Nga (strictly protect) stated that she and other family members had attempted to dissuade Liem from promoting self-immolation among his followers. However, she said that her father believed that self-immolation might force the GVN to intercede with senior An Giang authorities, who in Liem's view have a particular hatred of Hoa Haoism dating back to the Vietnam War.

Nga said that five followers of her father were prepared to commit self-immolation.

17. (SBU) Comment: Liem has long been an outspoken critic of the GVN and has periodically threatened that he or his followers might self-immolate to attract attention to their cause. His invitation for us to attend the April 3 event and his linkages between self-immolation and CPC strongly indicate that he is angling for greater international attention -- positive or negative -- for his cause. We reiterated that while we staunchly support freedom of expression and religion in Vietnam and will follow the case of the Tran brothers, we reject self-immolation or any other violent acts or any attempts to exploit or manipulate our contact with dissidents. We categorically warned Liem and his daughter that should Liem continue to advocate such activity we would suspend all contact with him and his organization. End Comment.

18. (SBU) Bio note: Liem was released in July 2004 from three years of house arrest stemming from a March 2001 altercation with authorities in An Giang province. Liem, who lives in HCMC, claims that the GVN keeps him under 24-hour surveillance, and that he is prevented from returning to An Giang -- the spiritual home of the Hoa Hao religion, as well as his birthplace. End Bio note.

WINNICK